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ABSTRACT

Although the critical thinking movement is a significant trend in both philosophy and teaching, there are certain points of view within the movement which have the potential for undermining its success. One of these developments, conceptual scheme talk, is contradictory to any intelligible notion of critical thinking. Believers in this concept hold that what counts for the truth is a function of a person's conceptual scheme, or peculiar human purposes, and as each individual's conceptual scheme varies, so does what counts for being called the truth. A person could not endorse the idea that truth is relative to one's conceptual scheme and at the same time give an adequate account of what it means to think critically. Critical thinkers must be careful before committing themselves to the belief that knowledge or reasonableness is a function of a conceptual scheme, for this makes the project of critical evaluation impossible, and any argument providing evidence against this position would contradict the position. "Conceptual scheme" and "background logic" talk can be translated into talk about biases, prejudices, and questionable assumptions. The teaching of critical thinking must entail some objective notion of truth, in order to avoid becoming just one more fad in the history of the critical thinking movement. (Notes are attached.) (MM)

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Critical Thinking and Conceptual Schemes

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Introduction:

One can hardly be trained in philosophy and not be excited by the current wide-spread interest in critical thinking. Numerous well-attended conferences have taken place, regional centers have been established, and scholarly journals have been created, all with the goal of learning more about rationality and how best to teach it to students. All are part of what is called "The Critical Thinking Movement."

In spite of the enthusiasm there are, I fear, certain points of view within the critical thinking movement which have the potential of undermining its success.

One of these developments is that of what I shall call 'conceptual scheme talk,' -- an area of philosophy nearly as popular today as 'critical thinking.' While 'conceptual schemes' are philosophically interesting, what is troublesome is that some of the thinkers who speak of them are also active proponents of critical thinking. The problem, I shall argue, is that such 'conceptual scheme talk' is contradictory to any intelligible notion of critical thinking. To put the issue clearly: I question whether one can endorse the idea that truth is relative to one's conceptual scheme and at the same time give an adequate account of what it means to think critically, or conversely, whether one can be a critical thinker and, following its canons, conclude that belief in conceptual schemes is a reasonable philosophical position.

II

What then is "conceptual scheme talk"? The current popularity of 'conceptual scheme talk' is understandable. In spite of 2,300 years of Plato's influence, positions which imply epistemological relativism have many contemporary philosophically-prominent supporters. Philosophy in the 20th Century has given us, among other things, a radical critique of reason and rationality. One needs only to read the later writings of by such contemporary pragmatists as Richard Rorty, or works by historians of science such as Thomas Kuhn--even though Kuhn denies he is a relativist.

In general, such thinkers share the belief that what counts for "the truth" or even being rational is a function of one's "conceptual scheme," "language-game," "scientific paradigm," "world-view," "comportment," or peculiar human purposes. So, it would follow that as one's conceptual scheme varies, so does what counts for being called "the truth."

It is, I think, important to distinguish this position from that of someone like Francis Bacon who urged us in his New Organon identify and purge ourselves of our prejudices, assumptions, or biases in order that we may more readily discern the factual evidence which leads to an understanding of the way the world is. For those who endorse an epistemology which includes conceptual schemes, whatever counts as a fact or evidence is itself relative to the inquirer's particular frame of reference or scheme. This is because the mind must assume some

set of organizing categories prior to discerning what counts for a "fact." For the conceptual-scheme-person, there are no objective or theoretically-neutral facts apart from the inquirer's conceptual scheme. Human reason, then, or what counts for being 'rational' is also scheme-dependent.

As I have said, such a perspective at least appears to be endorsed by some members of the critical thinking movement. For example Richard Paul, Director of Sonoma State's Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, has said,

"First of all the world is not given to us sliced up into logical categories, and there is not one, but an indefinitely large number of ways in which we may "divide" it up...and (there is) no "detached" point of view from the supreme perspective of which we can decide on the appropriate taxonomy for the "multiple realities" of our lives. Conceptual schemes create logical domains and it is human thought, not nature,
1
that creates them...."

Along much the same lines, another proponent of teaching critical thinking, Kerry Walters, in a recent essay in Liberal Education, claims that students should be exposed "to alternative schemes of interpretation" and should not think that "the method
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of critical thinking is the only good one." He believes, that critical thinking (especially if it emphasizes formal logic) is guilty of "methodological absolutism" by virtue of ignoring other equally valid ways of making sense of things.

Walters' position implies that the activity of "critical thinking" is itself only one way of conceptualizing or "dividing up the world," and that there are indeed other ways which are not only different but equally good--if they were not 'equally good', why teach them?

III

Now, given our understanding, what's wrong with joining "conceptual scheme talk" and "critical thinking"? My first concern is practical and has nothing to do with whether 'conceptual scheme talk' is a reasonable position to hold or not. I am concerned that such doctrines as espoused by Paul and Walters, by implication, will have negative practical consequences for the critical thinking movement. First, if we can agree that critical thinking is, at a minimum, an evaluative activity, we must ask how can one who believes that truth is always relative to some particular conceptual scheme ever hope to evaluate competing beliefs or positions, when those who hold differing beliefs might presumably be operating from different conceptual frameworks? For example, if one is evaluating an international political issue, if we presume that conceptual schemes are culturally bound, how is it possible for one culture to evaluate the political beliefs and values of another? If all beliefs are scheme-dependent, by what standard can one evaluate one cultural scheme and the positions it entails as being any more reasonable than any other? In fact, we should ask, What does the word "reasonable" mean if truth is scheme dependent? Evaluation, through critical thinking, requires a standard. But if the reasonableness of all beliefs is scheme-dependent, there is no independent standard to judge one scheme in relation to another, and even if there were, no one could be in a position "of supreme perspective" to know it. Hence 'critical thinking,'

at best, becomes a concern over logical consistency within any given framework or system of thought, with no way to evaluate the system as a whole or systems other than one's own -- what Paul has called, "Critical Thinking in the Weak Sense."

Such practical concerns which follow from "conceptual scheme talk," have little to do, however, with whether the position creating such difficulties is reasonable to endorse or not. As 'critical thinkers,' who are of course committed to holding rational beliefs, we should examine the reasonableness of believing that conceptual schemes determine what is called 'truth,' or how the world gets divided up. But rather than asking what evidence there is for the existence of such things, let us begin at a more fundamental level and ask how one could possibly know whether or not such things as conceptual schemes existed.

We should recall that 'conceptual scheme talk' is not simply concern over personal bias, prejudice, or something like Francis Bacon's Idols. Education can cure these 'all too human habits of mind.' Conceptual schemes are the "background logics" which, according to Paul, are assumed for all acts of understanding. It follows that what separates "conceptual scheme talk" from 'Baconian bias talk' is that schemes are irreducible one to another. On the Baconian account, prejudice or bias grow out of our experience of a common world. This experience gets distorted by our ideologies, social structures, or values. And, these distortions, these idols, can be overcome through education and reason. But from the conceptual scheme perspective, reason is ineffective in overcoming such distortions because what counts

for being 'reasonable' in one scheme is different from what is 'reasonable' in another. This is because reason itself is scheme dependent. Given this relative notion of rationality, it follows that a person operating in some 'scheme A' cannot possibly understand and "rationally" evaluate a person's beliefs operating in 'scheme B.' As Paul says, "Conceptual schemes create logical domains." What counts for "making sense" for any person is dependent upon the person's scheme.

The consequences of such a position, though, are strange. what follows from such talk is that the categories or linguistic frames of 'scheme A' and 'scheme B' are not translatable into each other, nor into a common "scheme C." If they were, they would share a common conceptual scheme, 'the scheme which conceptualizes all schemes,' and debates over what was reasonable or what made sense would be a matter of clarification and argument analysis within this widest, most general of conceptual schemes.

But, if each conceptual scheme, A and B, has a language, and some person who understands both languages claims that each language has its own conceptual scheme which is irreducible to a common scheme, we should ask, what sense such a claim makes. How could that person possibly know what she claims to know? To know that speakers of another language had a totally different conceptual scheme, one would have to both speak and understand both languages. But, it seems that if one person can speak both languages and understand their conceptual frames enough to claim they are irreducible, then the languages are at least to some

degree translatable one into the other. Otherwise, how could the one person understand both well enough to tell us that the two ways of organizing the world are so radically different that translation is impossible? The point is that if two points of view or conceptual schemes can be understood by the same mind, then they share a common conceptual scheme: i.e., that of the person who understands both. So, we should ask, If one person can understand two languages, Why talk of there being two conceptual schemes? Why not just two languages or two different ways of organizing the world, each describing a common reality--the world? And, while there are no doubt different ways of seeing things, these different ways can indeed be understood and evaluated by those who understand both. Given such considerations, as Donald Davidson has argued, perhaps we really do not need "the idea of conceptual schemes." ³ The whole notion, though intriguing and appealing to many, upon analysis becomes unintelligible. In order to know that there were such things, the knower would have to be in a position to both know two different frameworks, but not know if they were alike or different. To know that they were different would assume a common frame of understanding--a frame which is impossible if one talks of "conceptual frames" as being non-translatable.

If someone were to say that conceptual schemes are not simply linguistically determined, but are imbedded within the entire culture of which language is but a part, the same problems arise. How could one know that a culture has a different conceptual scheme? Presumably the one who makes such a claim understands that other people organize their world differently. But

to know that they organize their world (the world) differently, one must understand how in fact they do organize their world. But if one can understand how one organizes one's own world and how other people organize their world, hasn't the notion of a conceptual scheme been made transparent for such a person of understanding? Or, is one's understanding of one's own conceptual scheme and someone else's conceptual scheme still imbedded within yet a third conceptual scheme? And then are persons who understand our understanding of competing conceptual schemes, also performing their act of understanding from yet another conceptual scheme? And so on, ad infinitum. And if so, the notion of "understanding" is rendered meaningless. And, if understanding is meaningless, no one could "understand" that there were different conceptual schemes. Again, it seems that the notion of there being different conceptual schemes and no scheme common to all is so problematic that it should be abandoned.

The problems with 'conceptual scheme talk' do not stop with such "logical problems." As critical thinkers we should ask any relativist, if all truths are scheme dependent, presumably there are no truths common to all schemes. But, are there really any conceptual schemes where the human body deprived long enough of food and water doesn't die? Is death by starvation scheme dependent? Is a compound fracture of the fibula relative to one's world view or background logic? Is the fact that dinosaurs existed prior to us dependent upon whether one adopts one conceptual scheme as opposed to another? Surely not.

And finally, there is also a good deal of irony for a person to talk about conceptual schemes while extolling the virtues of critical thinking. Those who believe in conceptual schemes typically have trouble making sense of the rationality of their own claims. For example, in one of his articles, Paul is critical of John McPeck for his "(unwitting?) commitment to a rarified form of logical (epistemological) atomism..."⁴ But how, we should ask, if someone believes in conceptual schemes can that person be critical of McPeck's atomism? Perhaps McPeck simply has an alternative conceptual scheme suited to his own purposes, while Paul has his own scheme, suited to his. How, if we accept an epistemology which begins by assuming such things as conceptual schemes, can any critique beyond one's personal way of making sense out of things take place? Can we give reasons which are "scheme neutral?" Surely not if even logic is said to be scheme dependent. Why, then, should one adopt one perspective as opposed to another? And, if there is no objective way to decide, what does it mean to be a "critical thinker"? What sense can we make of the phrase "giving good reasons" if the world can be understood in "any number of ways"? Are there then "any number of good ways," and conversely, "any number of bad ways of understanding? How would anyone go about deciding? Or more fundamentally, what sense do the words "good" and "bad" have? Can "good and bad" mean just anything, depending on one's scheme or one's purposes?

But here lies yet a deeper irony: relativists do, in fact, argue for their positions. When one reads the literature, one quickly sees that evidence for the relativist position is

provided and relativists believe their evidence is "good evidence".⁵ For example, one assumes Thomas Kuhn believes that his arguments that truths in science are "paradigm dependent" are not themselves "paradigm dependent." In other words, relativists believe that it is rational to be a relativist. That is to say, the evidence they provide for their position is intended to be true--not relatively true, but objectively true, true for all rational persons. So, if at least some beliefs, i.e., "It is rational to be a relativist.", are thought to be objectively true, the claim that all beliefs are dependent upon one's⁶ conceptual scheme is false.

Why then, we might ask, given such problems, have persons committed to the canons of critical thinking and rationality endorsed such a doctrine as if it were obviously true?

One can only speculate on answers for such questions. Nonetheless one possible answer is that those who believe in conceptual schemes have come to their conclusions by describing the way people do in fact behave, use language, or make scientific breakthroughs. And in fact, as Plato knew, people do use language in a less than univocal fashion, do behave irrationally, harbor biases which distort their epistemic faculties, and engage in a lot of "normal science" which ignores counter evidence. And like Meno, we all give many speeches about truth, virtue, and reason (especially reason), without really having a clear definition of our subjects. But that, it seems to me, is why critical thinking is important. It is an attempt to overcome the sloppy fashion in which we approach many important

issues. The fact that throughout history people have used language without clear definitions which might satisfy Socratic questioning does not entail that no such clear definitions can be found or that all definitions are contextually relative or scheme dependent. Does the fact that most speakers of a language speak ungrammatically mean that we should throw out the rules of grammar? As Spinoza pointed out at the end of his Ethics, "All things excellent are difficult as they are rare." It seems that those who are willing to adopt the relativist position may have become disenchanted because most inquirers have been unsuccessful in attaining the ideal of rationality and univocal usage that the Platos in our heritage have sought.

Belief in conceptual schemes has also been given credence by research in Gestalt psychology. It can be shown that all acts of spatial perception are relative to the ground upon which the figure appears or perhaps one's point of view. But even if we admit that in some experiments what one sees is determined by the background, one's intentions, or point of view, it does not follow that the world can appear any way at all, that there are no "reality conditions" imposed on human cognition, or that there is no way of evaluating one way of seeing over another. That all do not see the same thing does not entail that all ways of seeing are of equal value. If they were, as Socrates pointed out to Theaetetus, we would not need to waste time and money educating people.

So, if my arguments are correct, critical thinkers should be very careful before committing themselves to the belief that knowledge or reasonableness is a function of one's conceptual

scheme. It makes the project of critical evaluation impossible; it appears to be a meaningless concept; and even if the position were accepted as true, any argument providing evidence for it would contradict the position. That is, if the arguments are considered to be objectively true, the position itself must be false.

Conclusion: It should by now be obvious that I consider the critical thinking movement to be something of no small significance. I believe that dangers to the continued success of the movement need to be identified and become subjects of continuous debate. The teaching of critical thinking void of a commitment to some objective notion of truth, may easily become just one more fad in the sad history of "educationism," a history which has to date created many of the problems the critical thinking movement is trying to address.

I would suggest that 'conceptual scheme' and 'background logic' talk be translated into talk about biases, prejudices, and questionable assumptions. For these traditional epistemic illnesses we at least know what we are talking about and, while cures have been slow in coming, there is at least the logical possibility of creating healthy habits of mind.

Endnotes

1 Richard Paul, "McPeck's Mistakes," Informal Logic, VII 1, Winter 1985, p. 40.

2 Walter's, p.237.

3 For a more detailed discussion of this issue see Donald Davidson's article, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Proceedings of the APA, 47, (1973-74), pp. 5-20.

4 Paul, "McPeck's Mistakes," pg 36.

5 See Maurice Mandelbaum, "Subjective, Objective, and Conceptual Relativism," The Monist, 62: 4 (1979) pp. 403-23.

6 For an excellent treatment of the "proofs for relativism" see Harvey Siegel's, "Relativism, Truth, and Incoherence," Synthese, 68, 1986 pp. 225-259. I am also much indebted to Harvey's constructive criticisms of an earlier version of this paper.